December 15, 2019: Third Sunday of Advent

A few weeks ago, I was helping a friend of mine move from one parish to another and I stayed overnight at his new rectory. When I was getting ready for bed, I went to brush my teeth and one of my front teeth started to move. I have crowns on three of my front teeth from an incident in the seventh grade (a story for another time), and I assumed it had somehow just come loose. I called my dentist in the morning and they told me to come in that day. My friend and I first went out to breakfast and all I had was some eggs over easy and wheat toast. As I started to chew the tooth came all the way out. I asked the waitess for something to put it in, and then I brought it with me to the dentist.

It turned out that the steel post in my gum actually split. My dentist told me this almost never happens. And he wasn’t really why it happened this time. But he was able to use the crown and simply put in a different post and secured the crown to the new post. He did tell me that I could not bite into apples anymore. And I do love my apples! Now I simply have to cut them up to eat them—not really a big deal.

This whole incident was rather unexpected. I was simply going through my usual brushing routine when all of a sudden things changed. At first I was not really sure what to do, and especially what to do when the tooth came completely out. With the tooth gone, I had a gap in my teeth and that was a little unsettling, but I did trust that my dentist would know exactly how to fix it.

If we think about what happened to Mary on that day some 2000 years ago, there is some parallel. Mary was simply going through her normal day’s routine when ‘bam!’—the Archangel Gabriel appeared. Now obviously this is far more momentous than what happened to me. But I often wonder what Mary must have thought in that moment before she replied to the angel’s request. For me there is an assumption that Mary was doing some mundane, daily task when she experienced this most sublime of moments.

What has floored me, though, is how Mary responded to Gabriel. There was no sense of fear or being overwhelmed. As I say to people, if the Archangel Gabriel appeared to me, there is no doubt in my mind that I would freak out. Instead, Mary is calm and truly open to what is occurring. Why? What is her secret?

There are three specific things about Mary that this story can reveal to us. One, she is a woman of prayer. There is little doubt that Mary was familiar with hearing the voice of God in her life. Her openness to hear whatever the angel had to say is a clear sign of someone who has an intimate relationship with the Lord. And a relationship that is truly intimate can only occur when there is real communication with, and understanding of, the other. A life of prayer opens us to hear God in the way He believes is best for us to receive his message. We should have little doubt that God communicated with Mary many times before, but most likely in ordinary ways. God chose this extraordinary way of presenting his message because of the extraordinary nature of that message. He would choose to become one with humanity through Mary’s ‘yes’.

The life of faith that Mary lived was both the foundation of her prayer life and what allowed her prayer life to grow. Again, her faith is a testament to her trust in the Lord as shown by her response to Gabriel. Her response was simple, clear, and demonstrative of her desire to live out the will of God—not matter what it might cost her, and no matter how it might endanger her life! Her faith was one of complete trust in God’s will. It was a trust based on a real relationship and knowledge of who God is. In her life of faith, she must have been a person who understood the history of salvation as shown through the history of her people. She knew God was always faithful even when we are not. His faithfulness would allow everything to work out for the good.

She was a person filled with grace and lived a life of grace. So often people will say, well, of course, Mary was good: look at her great gift of grace. But the reality is that she could have chosen to act as Adam and Eve did and ignore that gift and simply acted in accord with her own self-centered desires. Grace does not force us to cooperate with God: rather, it is an aid to strengthen us to follow his will, but—and this is a big ‘but’—we must choose to cooperate with God’s grace God. Mary was so blessed because, in her humility, she chose always to cooperate with God’s grace in her life.
Mary lived a life we can all strive to live, in exactly the same way she did. We too must become a people of prayer and not simply when it is convenient. We need to recognize that if we want a real relationship with God, it is essential that we actually communicate with Him to get to know Him. If it is an intimate relationship we yearn for, it is impossible without prayer. We must be people of faith and our entire life must be imbued with that faith. Every word we speak and action we take must allow Christ to be heard and seen. Our faith is not something we put on for Sundays and then discard the rest of the week. It is intended to be lived out each and every day of our lives. And for any of this to happen we must become people filled with God's grace. It is impossible to accomplish anything of value or meaning without the grace of God. And God is offering that grace to you and me at every moment of our life.

Let us prepare the best way we can for the coming of Christ, by living our lives with Mary as our example.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian